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HANDLING INDICATOR

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A-130

NO.

TO : DEPARTMENT OF STATE

INFO : BOGOTA, GEORGETOWN, USCINCSOUTH FOR POLAD

FROM : Amembassy CARACAS

DATE: March 20, 1970

SUBJECT : VENEZUELA/COLOMBIA BORDER PROBLEMS

REF : A-128, March 20, 1970

## SUMMARY:

Venezuela is faced with serious long-range problems in connection with three aspects of its relations with Colombia: the illegal immigration of Colombians into Venezuela, the illicit border trade and the demarcation of the continental shelf in the Gulf of Venezuela. Earlier governments had tended to put off dealing with these problems, but President Caldera since taking office has placed as a top priority the establishment of a climate in its relations with Colombia that could lead to serious negotiations on these complicated questions. Caldera has met Lleras twice to this end and negotiations have proceeded on all the problems. President Caldera's intentions to deal with Colombian problems quietly has also been designed to demonstrate to the Guyanese the manner in which Latin neighbors deal with complicated differences.

The current emotionalism regarding the border question was stimulated in Venezuela by the irresponsible exaggerations of the Capriles chain of publications which President Caldera put straight in a press conference on March 5 (See A-128, March 20, 1970). The Capriles' stories did, however, flush out some underlying anxieties from diverse sectors of Venezuelan society that expressed concern with the long-range prospects of an unrestrained flow of Colombians across the border, worry about the implications for Venezuela of a possible Rojas Pinilla victory in Colombia, the development of a possible El Salvador/Honduras type problem if concrete measures aren't taken within the next few years. We do not believe that the current irritations in relations between the two countries are of a critical nature. Nor do we feel that the

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Drafted by: POL:WHLuers:cr

Drafting Date:

Phone No.:

Contents and Classification Approved by:

POL:ETWalters

Clearances:

POL:TFlores DAO:Capt.Weary AgAtt:Mr.FitzSimmonds

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problems are promoting significant differences between the Venezuelan military and the government. Finally we do not believe that the Capriles charges reflect the views of a significant sector of Venezuelan society.

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COLOMBIAN IMMIGRANTS

Estimates of the number of Colombians illegally working in Venezuela vary from 150 thousand to over one million. Official estimates, however, are in 200 - 400 thousand range, most of whom are residing in the Western part of the country. These Colombians come to Venezuela to benefit from the higher standard of living and to work in agriculture or as domestic help. The most serious problems stemming from the Colombian presence are in the economically poor Andes region of the states of Tachira, Merida and Trujillo and parts of Zulia where large numbers of Colombians create burdens on public and health services, add to unemployment problems, and participate in illegal commerce across the border. Foreign Minister Calvani told the Chargé on March 18 that illegal immigration was the most serious of the three problems disturbing Colombia/Venezuelan relations. He said that where Colombians outnumber Venezuelans four to one as in some border towns, or where they were present in many thousands as in San Cristobal, Venezuela would have to take steps to change the situation. General Ferrero Tamayo, Director of the Cabinet of the Minister of Defense, told an Embassy officer last week that ways would be found to resettle Colombians away from the border areas. We have also had reports recently that the government has decided to stop the temporary migration of Colombian coffee pickers, but we doubt that this will be enforced since coffee would not be harvested without Colombian "wetbacks" who are not displacing Venezuelan labor. Venezuelans, under pressure from private and government sectors, might have to take measures soon to keep down the Colombian population in the border region preferably following agreement with the Colombian government.

ILLICIT TRADE

Illegal trade has been part of border life for ages and the economy of border towns such as Cucuta are virtually based on contraband traffic. Venezuelans purchase inexpensive agricultural products, clothes, and processed food from Colombia, while Colombians buy appliances, electrical equipment and wheat flour from Venezuela. Also Colombian coffee is illegally imported in large quantities but still not enough to permit Venezuela to fill its export quota for coffee. The most controversial aspect of this contraband is the illegal importation from Colombia of between 150,000 to 300,000 head of cattle per year. The powerful National Federation of Cattlemen is firmly opposed to any such importation and has been pressing for "closing" the borders. The Minister of Agriculture has been attempting to work out a commercial arrangement with Colombia that would legalize some importation of cattle. In view of the problem of patrolling the 2,000 kilometer border with Colombia, however, it is difficult to imagine that such an agreement on cattle could be controlled. We do not, however, view the illicit trade phenomenon as a source of great friction between the governments since both countries

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seem to derive some economic benefits from it and since both tend to maintain relatively loose border controls.

#### CONTINENTAL SHELF

The demarcation of the continental shelf is a ticklish legal problem on which could hang access to potentially rich oil deposits in the Gulf of Venezuela. At present the two governments are negotiating on the problem (See A-404 of Oct. 3, 1969). A technical level meeting concluded in Bogota on March 13 with the announcement that a modus operandi has been reached for future negotiations and setting the next meeting for June. The outcome of these negotiations are of vital long-range economic interests to this country, and resolution unfavorable to Venezuela could cause serious problems here. But as of now the issue is not a crucial one.

#### VENEZUELAN CONCERNS

The primary concerns of most thinking Venezuelans, therefore, relate to the long-range economic/social implications of the border problems, and not to short-range political or military difficulties. The government approach has been to play down the problems, keep them in diplomatic channels, and stress the close historical and cultural ties between two nations. Leading opposition politicians also, to the extent that they comment on the problem, tend to discount the Capriles allegations and observe that although the problems aren't critical now something must be done sooner rather than later to control the illicit trade and immigration. Embassy officers have noted in recent weeks a tendency among Venezuelan politicians to express worry that a Rojas Pinilla victory could have a bad effect on the Venezuelan/Colombian negotiations and might give support to Perez Jimenez backers here. Some observers have noted with concern Rojas' visit to San Cristobal (in border area) which is the stronghold of Perez Jimenez and where thousands of Colombian voters are living. But political pressure on Caldera within COPEI or from opposition parties on these border problems with Colombia are now minimal.

#### MILITARY EQUATION

Venezuelan military officers in talks with Embassy officers do not generally seem obsessed with the Colombia border issues although traditionally the Venezuelan military has tended to view Colombia as the primary <sup>hypothetical</sup> military foe. In recent weeks we have noticed that some officers point out that the Colombia border problem is potentially more serious than the Guyana problem. Yet these same officers say that the irresponsible Capriles chain has exaggerated all out of proportion the border difficulties with both Guyana and Colombia. Presidents Caldera and Lleras at their meeting at Ureña last December included their Ministers of Defense in the discussions with the view to improving cooperation between the two

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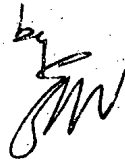
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armed forces in the border area particularly on matters relating to crime and guerrilla activity. In the March 19 newspapers General García Villasmil, Minister of Defense, is quoted as saying that a plan was ready for submission to both Presidents that would lead to closer cooperation between the two armed forces. We doubt that significant steps will be taken toward joint activity but the government efforts to bring about cooperation at least demonstrate the public desire of both the military here and the President to play down tensions that build up in the border area and to counteract sensational press stories. We also think that none of the recent border arrests or reported incursions of Venezuelans and Colombians across the border represent a significant trend or serious problem. Evidence to date does not indicate that there is any connection between the Capriles articles and the military in an effort to stir up concern about the border dispute.

HERRON

A handwritten signature, possibly "JW", is written below the name "HERRON".SECRET